Sentimental Comedy as Redressive Action

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When we mention certain works of the eighteenth century, such as those of Richard Steele, Hugh Kelly, and Richard Cumberland, it is almost commonplace to regard them as Sentimental Comedies. Allardyce Nicoll in *A History of Restoration Drama* explains that "from 1680 onwards may be traced the slowly gathering force of sentiment ... destined to be a force guiding and altering all types of drama for over two centuries to come" (235). However, scholars have disagreed on the definition of Sentimental Comedy as a genre because it includes several elements which are incompatible with one another. Therefore, in order to understand the essence of Sentimental Comedy, it is important to have an approach which unifies all the divergent elements. In this paper, with help from Victor W. Turner's theory of social drama, I will suggest a new inclusive approach, which analyzes the genre through its social relevance.

The Previous Major Approaches

In 1772, Oliver Goldsmith wrote a negative commentary on a form of drama that he labeled Sentimental Comedy in "An Essay on the Theatre; or A Comparison Between Laughing and Sentimental Comedy." Since then, scholars approaching Sentimental Comedy have been grouped into two major schools: one supporting Goldsmith's idea and the other disregarding it. Goldsmith states:

> a new species of dramatic composition has been introduced under the name sentimental comedy, in which the virtues of private life are exhibited, rather than vices exposed; and the distresses rather than the faults of mankind make our interest in the place.... If they have faults or foibles, the spectator is taught not only goodness of their hearts; so that folly, instead of being ridiculed, is commented, and the comedy aims at touching our passions, without the power of being truly pathetic. In this manner we are likely to lose one great source of entertainment on the stage (762).

Alice Rayner, for example, agrees with Goldsmith. She asserts that while Sentimental Comedy is regarded as a plausible comic form, it does not disrupt social norms. Restoration (Laughing) Comedy, on the other hand, turns a character or an event momentarily into an object, breaking the flow of subjective identification with societal myths (101–3). Although she recognizes the sincerity and usefulness of sentimental characters as models of behavior, Rayner asserts that, with the

expressed purpose of creating good example for their audience, the sentimental playwrights refused to make the real world intelligible or the fictional world dangerously attractive.

Robert D. Hume, however, disagrees with Goldsmith's label. In his examination of marital discord comedies, Hume asserts that both Sentimental Comedy and Restoration (Laughing) Comedy basically uphold monogamy and love–based relationships (176–213). About the term "sentimental," he asserts that by late seventeenth–century standards, practically every writer after 1740 was "sentimental" – not because they all accepted benevolent principles, or aimed to evoke tears, but because of a more subtle and pervasive change in the prevalent views of humor and human nature. Hume, therefore, categorizes comedies on the basis of the work–audience relationship. Instead of the Sentimental–Laughing terminology which Goldsmith advocates, he asserts that "the tone of genteel sensibility characteristic of Kelly and the sentimental pathos played up by Cumberland began to give place to an attitude of sentimental satire" (237). Although he realizes that sentimental satire is basically optimistic about human nature, Hume argues against the dichotomy (Sentimental–Laughing) proposed in Goldsmith's "Essay".

Victor W. Turner's Social Drama Approach

Recently, it is noteworthy that scholars such as Erving Goffman, Victor Turner and Kenneth Burke, have utilized theatrical metaphors as a means to explain human behavior or cultural phenomena. Such works fall within the realm of "dramaturgy." Even in the field of science, quantum theorists have discovered that the essential relationship between particles and energy is theatrical in many respects. Paul Davis states that "[q]uantum theory has taught us that the world is a game of chance, and we are among the players" (9).

From a dramaturgical perspective, Victor Turner advocates that "[c]ultures are most fully expressed in and made conscious of themselves in their ritual and theatrical performances" (quoted in Schechner and Appel, 1). In his theory of social drama, based on research of various societies in Europe, Latin America and Africa, Turner describes social drama as an incident or event in everyday life, and emphasizes the dynamic system of interdependence between social dramas and stage or aesthetic dramas. Defining social drama as "units of aharmonic or disharomic process, arising in conflict situations," Turner states that social drama follows these four stages: 1) breach, 2) crisis, 3) redressive action and 4) reintegration.

First, a breach is a situation in which a person or subgroup breaks a rule deliberately or by inward compulsion, in a regular norm–governed social setting, such as a family, work–group, village, church, university, community or nation. Second, a crisis precipitates conflicts between individuals, sections, or factions, revealing hidden clashes. It is always a turning point or moment of danger and suspense. Third, redressive action is what is done to resolve the crisis or to legitimize

other modes of resolution. Redressive action may be undertaken from personal advice and informal mediation or from arbitration through formal juridical and legal machinery. Fourth, reintegration is the outcome of the redressive action. It may occur in the following two ways: the restoration of peace and normality among participants; or the recognition of an irreversible breach of social order (Turner 1982: 61–88).

Insisting that "[c]ulture obviously affects such aspects as the style and tempo of the social drama," Turner notes that:

> the world of theatre, as we know it both in Asia and America, and the immense variety of theatrical sub–genres derive not from imitation, conscious or unconscious, of the processual form of the complete or "situated" social drama–breach, crisis, redressive action, reintegration – but specifically its third phase, the one I call redressive action, especially from redressive action as ritual process, rather than judicial, political, or military process (1986: 294).

A study of theatre in significant periods of Western history confirms the relationship between social drama, the events of every day life, and stage drama, especially in the portrayal of redressive action. In the golden eras of Western theatre, such as the ancient Greek theatre of the Fifth century B.C. and the Elizabethan English theatre, stage drama demonstrated the moderation of imbalance, or the breach of norms in society and on stage. This is also the case in the eighteenth–century British theatre. After having gone through two revolutions in the previous generation, the eighteenth century saw the rise of a middle class in England. Inevitably, the values of the middle class dominated many aspects of English society and certainly influenced the drama of the period. The conflicts generated by changing norms were the basis of many theatrical productions. Therefore, it is useful to analyze how comic performance functions as redressive action in order to understand the essence of Sentimental Comedy.

Comic Performances and Laughter

In general, comic performances can be defined as performances which provoke laughter. From the time of Plato, theorists have tried to understand the causes of laughter, but no one has yet been able to account for all situations in which laughter occurs. Since it is probably impossible to establish one theory which can apply to every aspect of laughter, I cannot address the problems contingent to its definition. Instead, my aim is to utilize some of the major theories of laughter in the analysis of comic performances from a dramaturgical point of view.

There have been a variety of theories concerning laughter, each containing a unique argument about a specific circumstance. However, as John Morreall points out in *Taking Laughter Seriously*, they are, in one way or another, based on the following three major currents: the relief theory, the

incongruity theory and the superiority theory. The relief theory proposes that we laugh when tension is built up and then released with (comic) relief. The incongruity theory suggests that we laugh when we recognize that logic or appearance contradicts our expectations. The superiority theory asserts that we laugh when we feel superior to others.

The Relief Theory

From a dramaturgical point of view, the relief theory helps clarify how laughter functions as a response to redressive actions. As Henri Bergson points out, "the comic does not exist outside of what is strictly human" (62). One of the reasons why people laugh is that while animals live by instinct, human beings thrive in a society which facilitates peaceful social interaction. Unlike other animals, humans are concerned about their impression on others. Therefore, people are constrained to act or perform according to the script provided by their society. The script is arbitrary in each culture and in each situation. In order to perform appropriately, then, we have to face the tension of adjusting ourselves to the given societal script. This tension must be released somehow for the society to function properly and for individuals to preserve their sanity. Laughter can be regarded as a key element for releasing this tension. Sigmund Freud, who is one of the major advocates of the relief theory, asserts that "the conditions for laughter are such that a sum of psychic energy hitherto employed in the cathexis of some paths may experience free discharge" (734). To apply this theory to Turner's social drama approach, laughter helps us to release the tension caused by our everyday lives.

The Incongruity Theory

The incongruity theory also helps clarify how comic performances function as redressive action. Arthur Schopenhauer, who developed the incongruity theory, asserts that:

> the origin of the ludicrous is always the paradoxical, and thus unexpected, subsumption of an object under a concept that is in other respects heterogeneous to it. Accordingly, the phenomenon of laughter always signifies the sudden apprehension of an incongruity between such a concept and the real object thought through it, and hence between what is abstract and what is perceptive. (91)

For example, we laugh when we see someone proud slip on a banana peel; we also laugh when young lovers sit on a freshly painted bench. This is because what we see contradicts what is expected. People pretend that they could never slip on a banana peel; young romantic lovers appear as if they were never subject to mundane accidents. Since every situation requires specific actions, our relationships with others are based on mutual performances. Young lovers create their own world and act like "young lovers" within the societal script. By a tacit consent, then, those surrounding them are required to adjust themselves to the performance of these young people. With his attitude, a proud man also requires us to treat him as a dignified person who never falls. In our

daily interactions, we continually have to deal with the tension created by encounters with others' performances. In all its domains, society is faced with a fundamental, unresolved incongruity between appearances and reality. Therefore, every now and then, we need a release from this tension. Any break from the societal script provides us with an opportunity to let go of our tension with laughter. Thus, in order to provoke laughter in the audience, comic performance can be used as a redressive action by portraying the incongruities in the societal script. Comic performance also serves the vital function of bringing into collective awareness the dangerous incongruities that remain unacknowledged in society.

The Superiority Theory

As for the superiority theory, its developer Thomas Hobbes claims that:

Sudden Glory is the passion which makes those grimaces called LAUGHTER; and is caused either by some sudden act of their own, that pleases them; or by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another, by comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves (57).

We are all inferior to others in some respects and the shame of our inferiority causes us to be tense in front of somebody else. If we discover an aspect of someone that is inferior to us, we can release this tension by transforming our feelings of inferiority into feelings of superiority and, thus, laughing. Therefore, from a dramaturgical point of view, laughter is an expression of momentary happiness only when it releases us from tension. Comic performances can be used as redressive action to give spectators an opportunity to experience this transformation through laughter.

What is important to note is that laughter is a matter of the people who laugh; social or staged performances laughed at do not contain objective characteristics which provoke laughter. It is a matter of how we perceive individual actions in a given situation. For example, comic performances which function as redressive actions for some people might not work well for others. Therefore, the breach or rupture of a societal script during comic performance provokes laughter only when it does not introduce tension. As redressive action, comic performances play with spectators' expectations, blur the social boundaries and challenge the norms of society.

The Six Types of Comic Performances

Applying the three major theories of laugher to Turner's social drama approach, I will next outline how redressive action is facilitated by the following types of comic performance: festive, shocking, clownish, witty, satiric and sympathetic.

The Festive Type

It is now accepted that theatrical performances were born from the rites of tribal or societal procreation. These rituals were held in special festive or carnival settings in order to worship the gods of harvest. The festive atmosphere of these rites provided a situation in which we could take

off "the mask we have put on to deal with others who have put on decent masks to deal with us" (Sypher, 220). Festive comic performances, thus, provoked laughter in order to affirm the primitive life force associated with procreation and allow people to speak and act freely, revitalizing society.

The reason laughter is connected with procreation rites is that it is intrinsically associated with activity and transformation. If we take into consideration that these rites were held mainly to celebrate the coming seasons, laughter possesses a cosmological characteristic, driving out death and promoting procreation. Laughter, then, basically functions to transform the objects which threaten us into a recognizable shape. By giving forms to the negative aspects of life, such as death and disease, laughter facilitates their assimilation into a positive life force. In terms of the relief theory, festive performances provoke laughter, helping people to release the tension brought about by the negative aspects of life and society. Festive performances thus function as redressive actions by revealing the ludicrous aspects of our existence and representing the logical order of society.

The Clownish Type

The clownish type of performance is based on the superiority theory because we laugh at the performers and their actions. This type can also be either situation−oriented or character−oriented. For example, misunderstandings among characters are situation−oriented while slipping on the floor is character−oriented. In either case, we laugh at the people who do foolish things because we feel superior to them.

We all occasionally desire to deviate from social norms, but in everyday life we are constrained by a fear of punishment. The clownish type provides us with an opportunity to release tension created in our everyday performances and to support societal norms by feeling superior to the people who portray deviation. Since it is natural to feel superior to those who do not have control over themselves, we can enjoy the uninhibited actions of comic performance, both as performers and spectators.

The Shocking Type

Each society has its own taboos and its own system for reminding people of those taboos. The shocking type of comic performance can function as one of the effective tools in the system. These performances portray taboos in order to shock the audience and convince them to more fully support the norms of the society they belong to. From the dramaturgical point of view, shocking performances establish norms implicitly by revealing behavior that is unacceptable to society, without the unnecessary tension caused by a hostile confrontation. They serve to bond members of the society and maintain a sense of community for the participants (both performers and spectators). This is how the shocking type functions as redressive action.

The most common taboos are ones closely related to our bodily functions. As Wylie Sypher points out, unlike animals, human beings cannot be human without being uneasy about their bodies

(208). Self–consciousness about physical functions distinguishes people from animals. Thus, for the sake of smooth social interaction, we must act appropriately within the given social script and cope with the tension created by our performances. In a social drama, it is almost impossible for us to have the opportunity to act indecently without punishment. Therefore, by enjoying the shocking type of comic performance, we can release the tension cause by our own bodies

Another taboo often treated in comic performances is human deformity. Aristotle states in his *Poetics* that "[c]omedy ... consists in some defect or ugliness which is not painful or destructive" (59). This idea has been favored by other theorists, such as Bergson, who asserts that what is laughable should be something correctable. According to Aristotle (and Bergson), we do not laugh at permanent deformity or handicaps. In reality, however, we do laugh at handicapped people in some situations. While we occasionally have the urges to act cruelly toward others, in most cases we are prohibited by the rules of the society. In other words, as civilized people, we perform as if we were not base enough to laugh at the deformity of others. Thus, shocking performances can provide us with an opportunity to release the tension created by oppressing our evil feelings. They also function as redressive action by revealing behavior which is intolerable within a society.

The Witty Type

The witty type also provides us with an opportunity to transform our hostile feelings into laughter, but in a more indirect way. Supporting Aristotle's definition that "[c]omedy ... consists in some defect or ugliness which is not painful or destructive," it is a performance in which people play verbal games with others' correctable follies. In the witty type, we are released from tension by laughing with, not at the performer. As seen in the terms of the incongruity theory, we laugh at the inconsistencies revealed by the performers, not at the performers themselves.

The witty performance instructs us in the most effective ways or tactics to transform hostile feelings into laughter. It also shows us how to hide our hostile feelings through performance. From a dramaturgical point of view, then, its tactical aspect enables the witty performance to function as redress to overcome the incongruities we must face in our everyday life. The witty performance can thus be used as an effective communication skill.

The Satiric Type

Satiric and witty performances are similar to each other. Both are used in reactive response to the incongruities on stage and in society. Like the witty type, satiric performances also require a tactful guise and are judged according to the efficiency of their disguise. The main difference between satiric and witty performances is the target of the hostile feelings. In witty performances, we laugh at ordinary individuals, including ourselves, whereas in the satiric type, we laugh at the establishment or human characteristics in general. For example, if a comic performance helps us change our hostile feelings toward the government or human greediness into laughter, it is a satiric

performance.

Another important factor of the satiric performance is that it has a cultural foundation. If the performance stresses the establishment, it is confined to a specific society. On the other hand, if a satiric performance stresses human characteristics in general, it gains a broader audience. For example, Moliere's *Tartuffe* or Ben Jonson's *Volpone* is more likely to gain universality than George Etherege's *The Man of Mode* or William Congreve's *The Way of the World* because the former deal with human follies in general, while the latter deal with the specific coterie of a society.

Satiric performances usually assume a more tactful guise than witty ones because satiric comedy has historically been in danger of condemnation by the establishment. Because of its subtlety, people repressed by their social and political systems have embraced the use of satiric performance much more than people who take their freedom for granted. This is probably because those who are oppressed need a way to express their frustrations and without resorting to violence. Providing us this staged breach, satiric performance transforms societal crisis into a manageable situation and functions as redress.

The Sympathetic Type

The sympathetic type is a performance which provides spectators, not performers, with an opportunity to transform their sympathetic feelings toward others into laughter. It does not breach the societal script, but transcends it with the audience's sympathy. We need to remember that laughter is a matter of the people who laugh. In a sympathetic performance, we find something honest and weak in common within all human beings, leading us to a sense of harmony. By unifying the participants (both performers and spectators), a sympathetic performance functions as redress in society.

Sympathetic performances cannot be explained by the superiority theory. As Frances Hutcheson points out in "Reflection Upon Laughter," laughter can be used to indicate good will and welcome. In greetings laughter is deliberate, not spontaneous. Because there should be a connection between spontaneous and deliberate laughter, it is difficult to accept the idea that spontaneous laughter is an expression of superiority while deliberate laughter is an expression of welcome. We smile or laugh when we exchange greetings because we try to show good will. We can deliberately use laughter that way because spontaneous laughter indicates the release from tension. Comic performances featuring this deliberate laughter can be used as redressive action by provoking laughter with the binding effects of sympathy.

The Six Types and Redressive Action

Comic performances serve to betray the norms of society and release the tension produced by a societal script. In other words, by affecting the established rules, comic performances serve to reintegrate or revitalize society itself.

Comic performances revitalize the society in two ways. While most comic performances reinforce the establishment, some are able to introduce a new perspective on the societal script. From the viewpoint of Turner's social drama approach, both cases function as redress. Because they bring about positive reintegration, these performances restore peace and normality among the participants. Especially in the theatre, people intentionally utilize comic performances to create a staged breach based on the social conflicts of everyday life. Through laughter, participants can then escape from the crises commonly subsequent to these breaches. Thus, comic performances act as redress in our society.

Comic performances reflect six comic types of performances. The balance among the six will determine how a comic performance functions as redress. In order to clarify the reason why sentimental comedy emerged in eighteenth–century England, I will next examine a representative work, *The West Indian*, in terms of the six types of comic performances mentioned above.

The West Indian

The plot of the play is as follows: Stockwell, a prosperous business man and a member of parliament, has summoned his illegitimate son from the West Indies to London. Before declaring his relationship, however, Stockwell decides to study his son's character while disguised as a friend. The son, Belcour, arrives in England, where he meets a penniless captain named Dudley and his two children Charles and Louisa. Belcour soon falls in love with Louisa. The Dudleys' landlords, the Fulmers, defraud Belcour of the diamonds he intended to give to Louisa. Misunderstanding the situation, Belcour insults Louisa, leading Charles to challenge Belcour in a duel. By the end of the play, all the problems are resolved; Belcour and Louisa are united, and Stockwell reveals that he is Belcour's father.

The main plot of The West Indian is the romance between Belcour and Louisa. The words of the two at the end of the play create an expectation of a future wedding, promoting the ideal of procreation in the society. In this sense, even though the play does not include festive scenes, it provides the audience with a sense of celebration, as do many other comedies ending with the happy resolution of the characters' problems.

The shocking type of comic performance is so strong that it is very difficult to use effectively. As with The West Indian, most comedies do not include this type of performance. This absence of the shocking type is common in Sentimental Comedy and clearly distinguishes it from other types of comedy.

The clownish type, which gives us the feeling of superiority to people who do foolish things, can be seen in the incident of the missing jewels. Misunderstandings among the characters accelerate the plot and create a situation in which clownish performances are used to provoke

laughter. The clownish performance can also be seen in the character of Major O'Flaherty. O'Flaherty is a stock character which appears in many comedies as a moving force in the story to provoke laughter.

The language employed in the play is more sermon–like than witty. In fact, Goldsmith and his followers were highly critical of Sentimental Comedy for this reason. Thus, Rayner is right when she asserts that a play such as *The West Indian* has nothing to do with the delight of rupture. However, the play indeed explores society with a different kind of comic performance: satiric.

A satiric performance transforms our hostile feelings. What is transformed, however, are the hostile feelings toward authority or the human condition in general, not toward ordinary individuals. In The West Indian, the first satiric element is the contrast between the corrupt state of society and the naive charm of the hero. This is illustrated through the frequent clashes between Belcour and the environment of London. The second satiric element is money. Through the discussion of money, the play becomes a satiric attack on society's failure to recognize the fundamental dignity of the poor. Also, through the Dudley family, the comedy reveals that the middle class cannot achieve financial stability through ordinary labor. The third satiric element is the duel. From the time of Richard Steele in the early eighteenth century, the drama of sentiment has taken a clear and forceful stand against dueling and other affairs of honor, frequently reducing it to an absurd custom. In *The West Indian*, Stockwell, who represents the norms of the society, tries to stop the duel between Belcour and Charles. Despite Stockwell's efforts, only the arrest of the Fulmers and the revelation of the truth about their duplicity regarding Louisa can prevent the duel. Honor, that intangible quality so highly prized in the eighteenth–century, creates serious difficulties.

Finally, the sympathetic type of comic performance provokes a calm smile rather than laughter. It is similar to feeling happy when others are happy. The hero Belcour displays the virtue of economic generosity and places little apparent value in money. It is important that early in the play Belcour spontaneously offers the captain the two hundred pounds because this act establishes Belcour's value as a generous, sympathetic character. In Sentimental Comedy, innocence and distress provide the moral drive to many comic plots, helping us empathize with its good–hearted characters. By providing the audience with a sense of connection, the sympathetic performance functions as a key element to reintegrate the norms of society.

Conclusion

According to Victor Turner's social drama approach, staged drama functions as a redressive action in the cycle: breach, crisis, redressive action and reintegration. In the social drama of eighteenth century England, one of the major breaches was the conflict caused by the rise of a middle class. The two revolutions in the previous century produced the crises which precipitated

the class conflict. From these crises, English plays with the values of the middle class emerged as redressive action. As the norms of the middle class spread, society was reintegrated. In time, previously highlighted values became unrecognizable, causing another breach to emerge. Accordingly, the plays representing the old norms were also reintegrated into a new form which could deal with another cycle of social drama. Sentimental Comedy functioned as a redressive action specific to the values of eighteenth–century middle class England.

Because Sentimental Comedy emerged to cope with then current social issues, the genre includes various kinds of comedies. Playwrights such as Richard Steele, Hugh Kelly, and Richard Cumberland intentionally composed comic dramas for the purpose of setting moral standards based on the values of the middle class. Others unintentionally wrote comedies with sentiments reflecting the process of social drama as redressive action. Even Oliver Goldsmith, who denounced Sentimental Comedy, could not avoid incorporating the trends of the period into his comedies. Therefore, I suggest that we should regard eighteenth–century Sentimental Comedy as a genre related to the organization of its elements, not as a genre with a fixed form. The differences among the comedies of this era can be recognized through six types of comic performances. For example, Goldsmith's comedies mainly utilize clownish and witty performances while Cumberland's comedies stress satiric and sympathetic performances. In other words, the comedies of eighteenth–century England vary, depending on the balance among the six comic performances, and yet constitute a specific genre which functions as redressive action to the social drama of the period. Thus, the definition of Sentimental Comedy as a genre should be utilized in order to understand the flow of the historical cycle of theatrical performances, not to categorize individual plays.

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